## Sprinkling's Major Wrinklings

by Kevin Maxey

Wrinkles are not desirable, whether they be wrinkles in our clothing, wrinkles in our skin, or wrinkles in our life. The dictionary defines a wrinkle as, "a ridge or crease on a normally smooth surface, caused by crumpling, folding or shrinking." Some have taken the smooth and level gospel message and crumpled it full of man-made wrinkles. They have folded a little here, shrunk a little there, and perverted the truth (Gal. 1:7). Our definition of wrinkle continues. It is "an ingenious new trick or method; clever innovation." Some have formed major wrinkles on the inspired teaching of baptism. They have introduced a "clever innovation" that says baptism can be performed by sprinkling. Let's investigate some of sprinkling's major wrinklings.

#### Command for Baptism

We must first establish the necessity of baptism. Christ clearly commanded baptism when He said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16; Matt. 28:19). When the guilt stricken Jews on Pentecost asked, "What shall we do?" Peter answered, "Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:37-38). Without baptism we cannot "put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27), "enter the kingdom" (John 3:3-5), "wash away" sins (Acts 22:16), "be saved" (Mark 16:16; 1 Pet. 3:21), or rise to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-4). These verses clearly establish that baptism is essential. But now we ask, how is this essential act of baptism to be performed? Is it by immersion or by sprinkling?

#### Origin of Sprinkling

If sprinkling did not originate with Christ or the inspired teachings of the apostles, then it is not authorized by God (Matt. 28:18f). When did sprinkling first originate? The first record of sprinkling is that of Novatian in AD 251. In AD 753 Pope Stephen II proclaimed sprinkling admissible only in cases of necessity. The council at Ravenna, which met in AD 1311, declared it no longer mattered which form was administered. By AD 1550 the practice of sprinkling was more common than immersion.

There is no record of sprinkling in the first century church. Even denominational leaders recognize this. John Calvin said, "It is of no consequence at all whether the person baptized is totally immersed or whether he is merely sprinkled by an effusion of water. This should be a matter of choice to churches in different regions, although the word baptize signifies to immerse, and the rite of immersion was practiced by the ancient church" (emphasis mine, Brents 310). Calvin, though wrong in his application, admits that sprinkling did not come from the first century church. We must remember that anything that does not originate from, as well as harmonize with, God's word is unscriptural. We are to "do all in the name of the Lord" (Col. 3:17). Holding to the apostolic "pattern" is essential (2 Tim. 1:13). Anyone teaching another doctrine is "accursed" (Gal. 1:8-9).

#### Definition of Baptism

1.) In Greek lexicons. The English word, baptism, comes from the Greek word, baptidzo. Thayer defines this word as, "to dip repeatedly, to immerge, submerge, overwhelm." Pickering defines it as, "to dip, immerse, submerge, plunge, sink, overwhelm, to steep, to soak." Altingius says, "baptism is immersion when the whole body is immersed, but the term baptism is never used concerning aspersion." Venem said baptism, "is no where used in the scripture for sprinkling." Even Martin Luther said subjects of baptism, "ought to be wholly immersed, and immediately to be drawn out again, for the etymology of the word seems to require it" (Brents 222-223). T.W. Brents, in his classic work, The Gospel Plan of Salvation, lists an impressive series of quotes from 34 lexicons and 70 additional scholars who all define baptism as immersion. He also lists 38 different versions of the New Testament which each translate baptidzo as meaning immersion.

2.) In Greek literature. Contemporary literature used baptidzo in reference to immersion. Polybius, who was born in 205 BC, describes a sea battle with the word baptidzo. "They made continued assaults and submerged (baptidzo) many of the vessels" (History, Book 1, 56:6). The ships were not fatally sprinkled. They were immersed in water. Josephus, who was born in AD 37, describes the murder of Aristobulus this way, "And there, according to command, being immersed (baptidzo) by the Gauls in a swimming bath, he dies" (Jewish Wars, Book 1, 22:2). This was not a death by sprinkling. Cassius, who was born in AD 155, describes the effects of a violent storm. "The ships which were in the Tiber . . . were submerged (baptidzo)" (Roman History, book 37, chapter 58).

3.) In God's word. The Bible itself defines baptism for us. Baptism is a washing. "Be baptized, and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16; Eph. 5:26). Sprinkling does not wash, but immersion does. Baptism is also a burial. "We were buried with Him through baptism" (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12). Burial requires a complete covering. Sprinkling does not cover, but immersion does.

#### Grammatical Inconsistencies

Sprinkle means, "to scatter into drops." Grammatical accuracy denies the possibility of sprinkling someone. You cannot scatter someone into drops. You can scatter liquid into drops, but not a person. However, a person can be immersed, which fits the accurate definition of baptism. Sprinkling does not grammatically fit the context of the passages on baptism. If you add the meaning of sprinkle into Acts 22:16, it would say, "Arise and be scattered into drops." Or, try Mark 16:16, "He that believes and is scattered into drops shall be saved." What about Acts 2:38? "Repent and be scattered into drops." Such a meaning is absurd. But the true definition of baptism as immersion fits. "Arise and be immersed." "He that believes and is immersed shall be saved." "Repent and be immersed."

#### Biblical Examples

**1) Jesus.** The baptism of Jesus requires immersion. Jesus "was baptized of John in the Jordan" (Mark 1:9). The Spirit descended like a dove when Jesus was, "coming up out of the water" (Mark 1:10). Going into the water and coming up out of the water signifies immersion. Why get in the water if you are merely sprinkled? We must follow Jesus' example, and He was immersed, not sprinkled.

**2) John the Baptist.** John the Baptist practiced immersion. We can see this from the previous example of him baptizing Jesus. Also, this baptizer went to Aenon, "because much water was there" (John 3:23). Sprinkling does not require much water, but immersion does.

**3) Ethiopian eunuch.** The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch affirms immersion. "Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water . . ." (Acts 8:38-39). Going down into and coming up out of the water would be a ridiculous thing to do if this traveling eunuch was only to be sprinkled. The eunuch went down into the water because he was immersed as God's word commands.

#### Have You Been Immersed?

But what if someone is sick? What if it's too cold? What if enough water cannot be found? Such questions constitute thinking "beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6). Excuses and hypothetical examples do not change what the Bible commands of you right now. Don't be guilty of trying to wrinkle the smooth and level truth of God's word on baptism. Have you been immersed in water for the remission of your sins?